

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19)
St. Matthew 18:21-35

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Peter asked a valid question. That is to say, at face value, it's a valid question. I mean, he essentially asked, "How often shall I forgive my brother?" But, as Old Adam always does to things like this, the question had to be made personal. "How often shall my brother sin against me?"

Now, you might imagine what Peter was really asking. "Is there a point when I can stop forgiving my brother? I mean, he just keeps on sinning against me! Sometimes, I've forgiven him for a sin against me, and he turns right around and does it again! How many times do I need to forgive my brother?"

Jesus' answer should be obvious: your brother will sin against you often, and you should forgive him for it every time.

In order to drive the point home, Jesus told a parable. He compared the kingdom of heaven to an earthly kingdom. The king, then, is representative of the Lord of all—God. The king wanted to settle accounts with his servants—read as the people who live in his kingdom. In this kingdom, then, the servants are representative of you, dear baptized.

One servant was singled out. He wasn't singled out for any particular reason. He owed ten thousand talents, but there's no indication that this is anything significantly more or less than the next guy. No, understand Jesus' introduction of this servant as nothing more than saying, "Take this servant, for instance..."

Ten thousand talents is no insignificant amount. A talent is a unit of weight. It has the equivalent of anywhere between 30 to 75 pounds, depending on who is doing the archaeology or weighing, I suppose. So, 30 to 75 pounds multiplied by 10,000 results in between 150 to 375 tons of some precious, monetary metal. You're looking at multiple millions or trillions of dollars by today's standards. Ten thousand talents is absurdly large! Needless to say, an insurmountable amount for any one man to repay, and that's the point Jesus was making in His parable—the actual amount is not important, how the servant accrued it isn't important, but that it is much, much more than the servant—than any servant—can repay is the important part.

The king demanded payment, but the servant was unable to pay, obviously. The servant was essentially in slavery, and the king was going to make that official. Understand, dear hearers, that the servant was practically losing his life over this—the king was essentially demanding the servant's life.

The servant, however, asked for mercy and patience. Though he asked for time in paying the king what is owed, he had to have known that it was impossible. The king certainly knew as he was moved with compassion, released the servant, and forgave him the debt.

Dear baptized, that servant could be any one of you, and, in fact, is every one of you. What you owe God is unimaginable and unfathomable. No figure can rightly demonstrate your debt of sin to God. And, in fact, the Scriptures would never outright tell you exactly how much sin you've carried around in your flesh, as if it could be quantified. The Confessions even imply that the full weight of your sin is hidden from you, otherwise such knowledge would utterly destroy you. You may get the idea that such an absurd number like ten thousand talents maybe isn't so absurd after all.

Dear hearer, do not dwell on the number, though. The Law of God simply shows you that you are a sinner and declares to you that it is more than you can handle. You may crawl on your hands and knees before the altar here and plead for mercy and patience, but you would never in countless

lifetimes be able to make up for what you have done—the price is too great, and for it all, you deserve to die!

But, the Father is moved with compassion and mercy. So, He sent His Son, your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to bear the full weight of your sins and redeem you from every last one of them—every last bit of your sinfulness. Your life is demanded of you, and Jesus paid the demand in full with His life. You are atoned for, redeemed, bought back from death to life by way of the passion and bloody death of Jesus on the cross. Your ten thousand talents is repaid, and that of your neighbor, and that of all on earth!

So, “How often shall my brother,” a fellow redeemed of Christ, “sin against me, and I forgive him?” Often and every time. After all, you often sin against your Creator and Redeemer and He forgives you of it every time...completely! He’s done the same for your brother, completely wiping out his slate of sin, just as He has done yours. So, what makes you think you’re better than God—that you know better than God—so that you would not forgive your brother? No, Jesus’ answer to Peter, and then to you is to forgive your brother every time.

But that’s not the way Old Adam works. Like I said, he likes to make things personal. Just look at the servant, for instance. Forgiven, he went on his way and found a fellow servant who owed him a hundred denarii. A denarius is a day’s wage, so 100 days’ wages—a pittance compared to what was just forgiven him. Just like the first servant had done, the second begged for mercy and patience. The first servant, though, would have none of it, having the second thrown into prison until he would pay all that he owed.

The king got wind of this. He had the first servant tortured until he would pay all that was due to him. Again, what he owed was greater than he could pay, and as this is a parable, and heretofore everything else has represented something, you might have an idea what is meant by the torturers.

So, what does all of this mean? It means that in those moments when you crawl to the altar of God, or in any circumstance where you seek mercy and patience from the Father, you are asking Him not to look at your sins, nor deny your prayer because of them. You are neither worthy of the things for which you pray, nor have you deserved them, but you ask that He would give them all to you by grace, for you daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment and torture. So then, you too, will sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against you.

Easier said than done. Easier confessed than done. Easier recited than done, as what you just heard was pretty much the entire explanation to the Fifth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, which is exactly what Jesus was teaching by way of this parable, answering Peter’s question. Your brother will sin against you often, and you shall forgive him every time. And, as reason for your doing this, Jesus points you to the forgiveness that you have received from the Father, for sins and sinfulness far greater than what your brother has done to you. But, as the parable also demonstrates, it is far easier for your Father to have compassion on you than for you to have compassion on your brother.

The simple reason for this is because you still have your Old Adam. Jesus has not returned yet, so you are still *simul iustus et peccator*—at the same time justified and sinner. You are justified because you are forgiven and set free by the blood of the Lamb, shed for you on the cross of Calvary. You are justified because you are baptized into the death and resurrection of the Son of God and Son of Man. You are a justified because you entire life and death are bound up in the life and death of Jesus, and He will see you through life and death to resurrection—a resurrection like His. You are justified because the Father declares you just for the sake of His Son, Jesus Christ. You are justified because you have God-given faith in these words: you are forgiven for all of your sins. But you are sinner because you still live on this side of eternity, in a fallen world, struggling with your fallen flesh.

As much as you may want to forgive your brother, it is difficult, if not impossible, to do. As much as you know you should forgive your brother, it is extremely difficult to find the will to do so. "[T]he spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (cf. Matthew 26:41b) So, like the servant in the parable, when you are approached by another asking for mercy and patience, you are so very often unable and unwilling to show any.

"So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." That, alone, should be enough to cause despair. Certainly, you can think of a time when you held a grudge against a brother, begrudgingly but not sincerely forgave a brother, or flat-out refused to show forgiveness to a brother asking for as much. The unforgiving servant is thrown to the torturers, and Jesus promises that your heavenly Father will do the same to unforgiving you.

And your conscience would remain in despair and terror were it not for the fact that it is by grace that you are saved and forgiven, not by works. It is Jesus, and Him alone, who has paid the full price for all sins, including your unwillingness and inability to forgive and your desire to hold on to grudges. On the cross, as Jesus bore the sins of the world, before breathing His last and giving His life as the propitiation for the sins of the world, He said, "It is finished." (cf. John 19:30) The work is done, forgiveness for all is won, and to you who are baptized and receive His Word and Sacrament, it is freely and often given and received.

That is to say, even though you daily sin much, you are forgiven every time. God gives you repentance, for this and every other sin, and showers you with grace and mercy to forgive you for this and every other sin.

Your God-given faith, poured upon you and your brothers in the waters of Holy Baptism, given to you and your brothers by way of hearing the Word of God (cf. Romans 10:17), apprehends this forgiveness and makes it yours. By it, you come again and again to the altar of God or to His representative, repenting of your sins, asking for mercy and patience, and your Father pronounces through His mouth-piece—your pastor—Holy Absolution. Those who have no God-given faith do not receive this forgiveness, nor do they seek it, and it is nearly impossible for them to give any.

But for you who are in the kingdom of your Father in heaven, you have been adopted by Him as fellow sons with His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ—to you He is patient and merciful and gracious and slow to anger. (cf. Psalm 103:8) That is because Jesus took your place in death—He did what you could not do, namely the work which wiped your overbearing slate of sins clear. "It is finished," He said, and so you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.